

Getting across Truth in a Leading Media

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The great gift of Josemaría Escrivá to the Church, and to the larger culture, is the idea of the sanctification of ordinary life. Every task, every moment has a meaning that infinitely transcends itself. It is a message that is as old as the Gospel, but one that was not always emphasized or expressed clearly over the past two millennia. I do not think that it is a coincidence that the life of Blessed Josemaría and the Second Vatican Council occurred in the same century. Both taught the universal call to holiness. And the teachings of both Blessed Josemaría and the Council will continue to be 'unpacked' well into this new millennium.

I come from a good Catholic background and owe a lot to my Catholic forebears-grandparents, great-grandparents. But it was nonetheless easy for me as a young Catholic adult, before I came in contact with the spirit of Opus Dei, to bracket off what I did forty hours a week in my daily and professional life, and that is what I did. As a practicing Catholic, I obviously did my best to avoid behavior that might be construed as sinful in my hours at the office, but otherwise I did not see any connection between my work and my faith. This was also true of my marriage, which took place when I was twenty-eight. Yes, marriage was a sacrament, and, yes, there were certain rules, which, as a good Catholic, I followed. But here again, I did not see marriage as a path to sanctity, or even as a school of virtue. I did not understand that one important purpose of marriage is to help each partner flourish by making a full gift of self to the other.

During those years of early adulthood I did read a number of classic spiritual writers, but interestingly they did not give out many hints about what to do

with one's every day life in the office and at home. Now, admittedly, the greatest spiritual writer of them all, St. Paul, wrote to the Colossians:

“Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men”¹.

This is very good advice, but the great spiritual writers who followed — Thomas Kempis, St. John of the Cross, Theresa of Avila — do not really develop it. These writers can, and should, be read with great profit by the laity. But books like the *Imitation of Christ* are really addressed to people who have separated themselves from the world; they do not present ordinary work, marriage and child-rearing as paths to sanctity. The assumption is that a lay person works out his salvation *despite* being in the world, that a life of holiness and a life of ordinary work are two separate things.

So, unconsciously more than consciously, I was looking for a key, the missing piece in the puzzle. My primary error, which I think is very common, is that I thought that for the layperson, the Catholic faith is a checklist of obligations, rather than an adventure in grace in ordinary life.

It was not until my wife and I met Escrivá that we finally got this message. It was like discovering a new and hidden continent, one with great riches and possibilities. Not only did it change the way we practiced our Catholic faith, but it helped us to connect this newly energized faith to our daily life. It was like a second conversion, and the most amazing discovery was that this conversion (if it was real) would lead to a third and fourth, to many conversions, large and small. As Blessed Josemaría reminds us, “Sanctification is the work of a lifetime”. People are not born holy, but are gradually forged in holiness by constantly beginning over again. Life was suddenly, as I say, an adventure of grace, a crossing of thresholds into terrain which previously had been invisible.

But this adventure is in the midst of the ordinary. Blessed Josemaría vividly set this forth in a homily at the University of Navarre entitled ‘Passionately loving the world’.

You must understand now more clearly that God is calling you to serve him *here and from* the ordinary, material and secular activities of human life.

Either we learn to find our Lord in ordinary, everyday life, or else we shall never find him.

A holy life in the midst of secular reality, lived without fuss, with simplicity, with truthfulness.

I also came to discover that this was the primary message of the Second Vatican Council to the laity. Today, most lay Catholics think (as I once did) that the documents of Vatican II dealing with the laity talk mainly about the role of

¹ Col 3:23.

the laity in the Church. But they are really about the role of the laity in the world. The real message is that lay people no longer had a 'bye' on the interior life and apostolate. They were called to sanctify themselves and the world through their work as lawyers, bricklayers, housewives. They were to engage in ascetical struggle and do apostolate and not just leave these activities to priests and nuns.

I had in the meantime switched careers. I was no longer an investment banker, I was a writer. And I write for many secular publications. So, what did my sitting down at my word processor each day have to do with my faith? Well, that can be a very ordinary activity, sitting in front of a computer screen and tapping at the keys. But the discovery that these ordinary professional moments can be an overflow of the interior life is revolutionary. As I writer, I have a call from God; but there is no 'flight from the world' in answering it; both feet remain planted firmly in the ordinary. Each moment can be offered to God. And I am helped by the ascetical means that weren't always available to a layperson — mental prayer, spiritual direction, frequent communion. And these means of formation do not make me 'churchy' or quasi-clerical. I am a layperson. When I write, I retain a secular (not secularist) outlook. And that is how I can try to act as leaven in the world.

Any writer will tell you that the most difficult thing in the world is to sit down at one's desk and start writing. Most writers have elaborate rituals to postpone the moment. In the old days it was sharpening pencils; now it is checking one's e-mail. I will tell you another secret: although many writers live in New York City, they don't actually write there. New York is the most distracting place on this planet. It is very difficult to sit down and write. So most New York writers don't write their books in New York. They flee to the country; they rent a fishing shack or a house in the mountains. And I have to admit that my recent book (about Darwin) got written very quickly in a house near the Atlantic Ocean.

But this is where Blessed Josemaría comes in. There is a picture of him next to my computer and he is asking me for an heroic moment. I don't check my e-mail, I start writing. And while I write I try to remain mindful that I can only offer to God work that is done well. And the offering is all the more pleasing to God if I work when I don't feel like it. The interesting discovery is that some of my best work is done on days like that: when I am not in the mood and would rather be doing anything else. Just as our best prayer can sometimes happen when we are feeling spiritually 'dry', so some of our best work, by God's grace, can happen when we are tired or feeling uninspired. These moments, in the words of Blessed Josemaría, can be 'divinized'. And that can make all the difference.

Blessed Josemaría placed a great emphasis on the truth. It is a rather unfashionable concept these days: the idea that there is an objective order of

truth that is not subject to our whim and manipulation. My job as a writer is to hunt out the truth and express it as clearly as possible. This can be a very demanding task. There is always the temptation to take a short-cut, fudge a quotation or reference, rely on a superficial impression or connive with the prejudices of the day rather than present an uncomfortable truth. But again, by seeing my work as a God-given vocation in which I identify with Christ, who is Truth itself, I am able to struggle in this area as well.

It is my vocation as a Catholic layperson to do apostolate and as a writer to do apologetics in a manner that will ‘click’ with my readership, which, in the case of, say, the *Wall Street Journal*, is highly secular. And the question might first be asked: What ever happened to Catholic apologetics? Or to the apostolate? The Second Vatican Council said that a lay Catholic who “does not work at the growth of the body [of Christ] to the extent of his possibilities must be considered useless”. These are strong words. How many Catholics are trying to bring people into the Church, or at least implant in people the truth uttered by St. Augustine in his *Confessions*: “We were made for thee, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee”? Isn’t there instead a religious indifferentism that can actually be embarrassed by a neighbor or colleague who starts asking questions about the faith? But, again, I learned from the works of Blessed Josemaría that a vigorous apostolate is part of being an ‘ordinary’ Catholic.

Yes, an effective apostolate can be very ‘ordinary’, very ‘secular’. You need to meet people where they are, just as St. Paul did in Athens. You have to give them answers that they can understand. There are a lot of people in the modern world who, in the privacy of their hearts, are searching, looking for reference points to give their lives meaning. The media, and many social scientists and psychologists, are giving them the wrong answers. And these wrong answers are based on a false anthropology which views man as no more than a *thing*, an accidental collation of atoms, a walking bundle of appetites, a vector of various economic forces. But man is more than that: he is an acting subject with a free will and a spiritual hunger that can only be satisfied by God.

One of my tasks as a writer is to remind people about what Pope John Paul II calls the “truth about man”. But I cannot do this in a ‘churchy’, top-down way. Indeed, sometimes I have to be a little sly about it. You can’t always start with the ‘G word’. I have to try to get across truths with a secular vocabulary which nonetheless might lead my readers in a theological direction. This is in the spirit of Escrivá, which teaches that we deal with people in the circumstances in which we find them and try to lead them in ways that they will understand. You try to be as natural as possible. You might call this ‘pre-evangelization’. It was, as I say, the strategy of St. Paul when he confronted the intellectual establishment in first-century Athens.

For example: The Catholic Church is almost alone today in defending certain antecedent moral truths which most people agreed about even a generation ago. Modern opinion holds that morality is simply a collection of rules whereby an outside party (God, the Church) is imposing its ideas about how things are on *me*. Even many Catholics think this way. When it comes to the Church's moral teachings, all they want to know is: What is permitted and what is prohibited? But the purpose of the Church's moral teachings is not simply concoct legalisms to direct people's lives in preordained channels. Rather it is to help each person answer the question: What sort of person am I to be? How am I to flourish? How am I to be happy? And in answering these questions, we discover that the human person has certain built-in truths which we can choose to respect or not respect. And if we respect them, if we truly wish to flourish, then we are going to avoid certain kinds of behavior. This is the only reason that there are negative commandments, such as: do not lie or cheat; do not commit adultery; and so forth.

So, in trying to teach Catholic truths, for example, about sexual morality to the modern world, a most difficult task, it is not usually helpful to simply present a list of sins and warn people about offending God. This has its place, but it can be more helpful first to remind people where forty years of the so-called sexual revolution have gotten us. You cannot make the case that the sexual revolution has made people happier. Indeed, the reverse is the case. Easy divorce, for example, was supposed to solve those 'hard' cases that undeniably exist. But widespread divorce has created many, many more 'hard' cases than it has solved, if, indeed, it can be said to ever solve anything. It is important to help people see that the sexual revolution has complicated, rather than liberated, many lives.

But that is only the beginning. That is the 'pre-evangelization' part. What I love about the teachings of Blessed Josemaría and of Pope John Paul II, is that they are incredibly positive. We are not supposed to go around and simply remind people that they should avoid certain behaviors. Indeed, behind every 'no' in the commandments, there is an even greater 'yes'. The point of any moral system, and certainly the Church's, is to help people to be more fully human, to be what they are meant to be. And so we have to present a very positive image of marriage, for example, as a path to sanctity and to ordinary happiness.

There is a lot of gloom today among religious people of whatever denomination, a pessimism which says: We cannot change anything, the world is simply going to become more sinful and corrupt. But that was never the attitude of Blessed Josemaría. He said that our task is not to correct, but to build. I love that sentence. And it doesn't matter what means we have at our disposal. If we are doing the work of God, we don't have to worry, because, as Blessed Josemaría put it, God does not lose battles. I predict that the new 'spring time' in the Church, which is already beginning, will not involve large movements or 'struc-

tures'. That is not God's usual way of doing things. Rather, it will be the interior conversion of individuals who learn how to sanctify their ordinary lives that will determine the next chapter of history.